

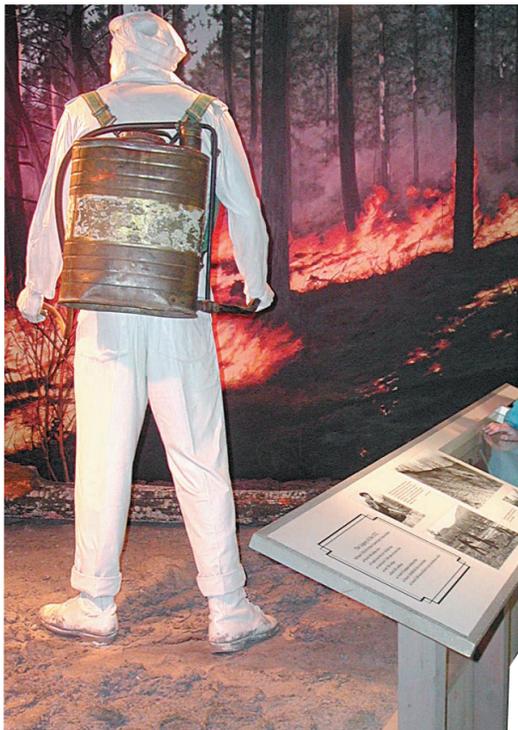
# Michigan Time Traveler

An educational supplement produced by Lansing Newspapers In Education, Inc. and the Michigan Historical Center.

## KIDS' History

### Fire!

In honor of Fire Prevention Month, this Time Traveler visits Michigan in the 1870s and 1880s when great fires burned much of our state. Fires are part of nature. They cause lodgepole pinecones to release their seeds and create places where Kirtland's warblers live. But fires can also be frightening.



Dansville Elementary School students view the CCC exhibit at the Michigan Historical Museum.

### Fires and Change

After 1871, fires continued to break out in Michigan with the dried tree branches left behind after logging. The fire of 1881 gave Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, her first assignment. She went to Michigan's Thumb to provide relief—food, clothing and household goods—to victims of the fires of 1881 that burned 70 townships, destroyed 1,521 houses and took the lives of 220 people. More than 14,000 people needed help.

She wrote: "The memorable forest fires of Michigan . . . raged for days, sweeping everything before them . . . man, beast, forests, farms . . . every living thing . . . Here occurred the first opportunity for work that the young society had found . . . We had not mistaken the spirit of our people; our scarce-opened doorway was filled with men, women and children bearing their gifts of pity and love. Tables and shelves were piled, our working committee of ladies took every article under inspection, their faithful hands made all garments whole and strong."

The fires also spurred Michigan to develop programs to protect and eventually replant forests. During the Great Depression of the 1930's, men who worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) fought forest fires. Today, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Forest Services preserve and maintain Michigan's forests.

### The Day Michigan Burned

The Great Fire of 1871—122 years ago this month—swept east from the shores of Lake Michigan. At the same time, the great Chicago Fire was also burning.

Fires destroyed Holland, Manistee, Glen Haven and at least forty smaller villages. Fires spread from Peshtigo, Wisconsin, to Menominee, Michigan, in the Upper Peninsula. Fires raged in the Saginaw Valley, Genesee County and the Thumb. Smoldering fires even threatened Lansing. Students attending the State Agricultural College helped save the city.

No one knows how the fires started. But they spread fast because of the unusually dry summer.

About 200 people died, and 15,000 people lost their homes in Michigan. Ironically, twenty-four hours after the fires, torrential rains fell.

#### Excerpts from Kirk Shepard's "A Boy's Memory of the Big Fire" (Courtesy of the Menominee County Historical Society)

... The summer of 1871 was unusually dry. I don't think a drop of rain fell during August and September, and on quiet days when no wind was blowing, a pall of smoke hung over the bay, so dense at times that the vessels coming into and leaving Menominee had difficulty in navigating.

Sunday, October 6, was warm and sultry, with no wind to speak of. . . . About 9 p.m. the wind started to blow quite hard from the west. Mr. Farrier had charge of the store during Dad's absence and had closed up rather early. Our family lived over the store. Between nine and ten o'clock Joe LeRoy, who ran the Menominee house, came down to the store for a gallon of kerosene. . . . I heard LeRoy say, "There's a big fire coming up in the southeast." The next I remember was mother waking us up and telling us to get dressed as quickly as we could.

When I got downstairs and looked out the window, the sky was a red glare from horizon to horizon, and the wind had increased to a gale. Pieces of tree limbs and siding from houses all ablaze were flying overhead and dropping in the bay. Mother said that orders had come that all the women and children were to take to the boats at

once. We didn't stop to pack, but I grabbed a small tin box belonging to dad, containing papers and rushing into the store, I took all the money in the till and put it in the box. I still have the box. . . .

By this time the wind was blowing hot, like the breath from a furnace. The Dunbar had a long overhanging stern, and when we went aboard I noticed a dozen women sitting in a circle, all praying. . . . The boat crew stood by, ready to cast off, but the fire never reached the docks. . . .

As I wouldn't stay put in one place very long, I sneaked off the boat and went out on the dock. It was light as day. . . . Buildings would suddenly burst into flames with apparently no fire near them.

... Just as it was getting daylight we heard rain pattering on the deck overhead. Then the tenseness broke. Someone started a hymn and all joined in. At daylight we all went home. Menominee had been saved probably by some freak of the wind. Those who saw that fire will never forget that awful glare covering the whole sky. I was ten years old at the time, and I'll never forget it.

### The Kerns Hotel

In the twentieth century, fires were more of a threat to buildings than to forests. For example, on December 11, 1934, a fire broke out in the Kerns Hotel, on the corner of Ottawa Street and Grand Avenue in Lansing. Thirty-four people, including seven Michigan legislators, died. Forty-four people, including 14 firefighters, were injured.



Students from Dansville Elementary School who participated in the BIG History Lesson at the Michigan Historical Museum admire the fire call box. The Membership of Fire Call Box 23 donated this call box to the Michigan Historical Museum. The Box 23 Club takes its name from this call box that sounded the first alarm for the Kerns Hotel Fire.



### Michigan Fires Time Line

- 1871:** The Great Fire of Michigan burns from shore to shore.
- 1881:** The American Red Cross issues its first nation-wide appeal to help victims of the Thumb Fire.
- 1896:** In Ontonagon County 344 buildings and 228,000 acres burn.
- 1908:** The Mertz Fire sweeps the Alpena area and kills 44 people.
- 1911:** Twin fires destroy Au Sable and Oscoda.
- 1920:** Fire scorches 140,000 acres in the Upper Peninsula,
- 1968:** Fletcher Road fire in Kalkaska County consumes 4,692 acres.
- 1976:** Fire destroys 72,500 acres of wild land in the Seney National Wildlife Refuge in the Upper Peninsula.
- 1980:** The Mack Lake fire destroys nearly 24,000 acres of land in southern Oscoda County.



Ojibwe of Michigan first told the Legend of Sleeping Bear—Mother Bear and her two cubs escape from a forest fire in Wisconsin and cross Lake Michigan. This painting is by Gijsbert van Frankenhuyzen from *The Legend of Sleeping Bear* by Kathy-jo Wargin. In 1998, the Michigan House of Representatives passed a special resolution that honored it as Michigan's official children's book.



Forest Fire in Upper Peninsula, 1920 (State Archives of Michigan)

### At the Michigan Historical Museum

Visit the 1920s Street Scene and the Great Depression Galleries.

The Michigan Historical Museum is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday-Friday: 9 a.m.- 4:30 a.m.; Saturday: 10 a.m.-4:00 p.m.; Sunday: 1-5 p.m. Telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. Visit the Michigan Historical Museum's Web site: [www.michiganhistory.org](http://www.michiganhistory.org).



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### Things To Do

- Read more about Michigan's fires: *Michigan on Fire* by Betty Sodders. Thunder Bay Press, 1997. *Michigan on Fire 2* by Betty Sodders. Thunder Bay Press, 1999.
- At [www.michiganhistory.org](http://www.michiganhistory.org), tour the 1920s Gallery and the Great Depression Gallery. Then go to Kids' Stuff and Teachers' Stuff.
- Comments or Suggestions? Write to [timetraveler@michigan.gov](mailto:timetraveler@michigan.gov).